

No far-right turn

By Dominic Standish
Special to Italy Daily

As French voters go to the polls in the second round of the presidential elections, the European media are depicting Italy as another country under the influence of the far right.

"In the past two years, right-of-center parties have gained control of Italy, Austria, Denmark and Portugal," wrote Britain's Sunday Times on April 28. "In most cases, this success has come thanks to alliances with radical right-wingers such as Joerg Haider in Austria, Umberto Bossi of the virulently anti-foreigner Northern League in Italy, and Pia Kjaersgaard, a Danish maverick populist."

The Financial Times online, on April 22, also explained the new power of the European right through alliances with far-right parties. Under a map of Europe showing a sea of rightist parties taking control, it highlighted the inclusion of the "far-right" Northern League and post-fascist National Alliance in the governing coalition of Silvio Berlusconi.

In addition, the day after Jean-Marie Le Pen's first-round success, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) published a report condemning racist parties in Italy's government. "ECRI is alarmed by the participation in the governing coalition of political parties whose members have resorted to xenophobic and intolerant propaganda," it wrote. The report singled out the Northern League, stating that its members "have made a particularly intense use of racist and xenophobic propaganda."

But during the last week, both the Northern League and the National Alliance have distanced themselves from the French leader of the Front National.

"Le Pen is the wrong answer to the right questions," said Bossi in an interview with Corriere della Sera on April 24. Bossi described Le Pen as a "fascist" and explained their differences on immigration by saying: "Le Pen wants to throw immigrants into the sea, while we want a clear law on immigration."

Now, Bossi is trying to present himself as a supporter of decent immigrants. "Regular immigrants, immigrants who work, honest immigrants — we're ready to help them," he stated during this interview.

Bossi's apparent new sensitivity toward immigrants and his description of policy differences with Le Pen directly contradict his previous statements.

"I am fed up with these crocodile tears over immigrants," Bossi said in response to the arrival of 1,000 Kurdish immigrants in Sicily in March. "It is time for action. If I had my way, we would sink these smugglers' ships, blow them out of the water, not just confiscate them."

The more sophisticated National

Alliance has long distanced itself from frankly nationalist, anti-immigrant politics. Last week, its leader, Gianfranco Fini, described Le Pen as "alien" and expressed concerns that his success threatened re-establishing a Europe based on nationalism rather than union.

While Berlusconi initially greeted the news of Le Pen's success, he quickly toned down his remarks that this indicated a European shift to the right. After his gaffe celebrating the superiority of Western civilization over Islam, does Berlusconi now appreciate the new etiquette of cultural diversity in Europe whereby it is no longer acceptable to celebrate any right-wing, anti-immigrant or pro-Western politics in public? Recently, Berlusconi even said that his Forza Italia party is on the left.

The irony of the media's and ECRI's focus on the National Alliance and Northern League is that it helps Berlusconi and Forza Italia appear moderate. Yet during a television interview in March, Berlusconi called on Parliament to look favorably on his government's anti-immigration legislation. "In no time, we'll be thrown out of our own country by masses of immigrants," he suggested, even though Italy has one of Europe's smallest immigrant populations of approximately 2 million.

The legislation will make it much harder for immigrants to obtain work permits, speed up deportations and give the Navy new powers to intervene when boats of immigrants approach Italy's shores.

It is these measures that have real implications for the lives of immigrants, not the outrageous outbursts of politicians like Bossi. Only a week after the upper house of Parliament, the Senate, approved the new immigration legislation in February, prosecutors started an investigation into the role of the Navy in the drowning of some 50 immigrants at sea.

To boot, police raids and mass deportation of immigrants have increased during Berlusconi's administration.

The interior minister, Claudio Scajola, boasted after the repatriation of more than 1,300 immigrants over a few days last February. "This is the biggest operation we have ever carried out in Italy." In March, Scajola estimated that expulsions of asylum seekers had risen by 30 percent since June 2001.

Berlusconi overcame considerable personal animosity toward France's President Jacques Chirac to side with him against Le Pen for the second round of the presidential elections. Similarly, most European leaders are boosting their liberal credentials by supporting Chirac. But behind this facade, it is the current European governments who are making life tougher for immigrants.

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